
Artistic Research and the Poetics of Knowledge

Kathrin Busch

One of most intriguing aspects about art today is its entanglement with theory. In fact, contemporary art practice is now so highly saturated with theoretical knowledge that it is becoming a research practice in and of itself. Artists have not only taken up art criticism and negotiations, they now also integrate research methods and scientific knowledge into their artistic process to such a degree that it even seems to be developing into an independent form of knowledge on its own. If this tendency is reinforced by the growing transfer of theoretical knowledge in the course of restructuring art academies and establishing so-called artistic research projects, such a blurring of the lines between art and theory could no longer live up to the classical philosophical notion that art is ultimately a sensual form of truth.

Artistic appropriation of knowledge evokes different, independent forms of knowledge, in order to complement scientific research with artistic research. With regard to the relationship between philosophy and art, this implies that artistic practice is more than just an application of theory and that theory is more than a mere reflection on practice. Deleuze perceives this unique relationship as “a system of relays within a larger sphere, within a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical.”¹ Art and theory, in effect, are nothing more than two different forms of practice interrelated through a system of interaction and transferences. In this constellation, philosophy neither brings the arts to the point nor does art sensualize philosophical truths; philosophy serves a knowledge-based artistic practice as a point of reference, similar, conversely, to how art might affect theoretical practice.

This constellation of chiasmic conditions has not yet seemed essential to the art academy restructuring program of the Bologna Accord, nor should it be confused with the appeals of the so-called information society, which have now reached art and artistic production. Instead of a reciprocal referencing of theory and practice, the call to put art on a scientific basis is asserted. The preparation and establishment of a theoretical basis for art education, now required for the academies, are rapidly developing into the questionable claim to have canonistic knowledge at one’s disposal. It’s now the turn of artistic research to respond to this knowledge imperative.

Initially, the justified attempt to anchor a theory-derived and practice-based concept of art within an academic curriculum was a response to a changed notion of art, as well as to a significant trend in contemporary art that focused on the production of knowledge rather than of artworks. In contemporary art practice, especially that which belongs to the tradition of artistic institution criticism or contextual art, the explicit recourse to philosophical or sociological theories and the integration of scientific research methods is a common and recognized process that critically analyses both the commodity aspect of artworks and their purely aesthetic impact, as well as the power structures of the art world. The resulting art productions are characterized by an interdisciplinary procedural method, in which artworks are created within a broader, theoretically informed framework. The art world seems to have

become a “field of possibilities, of exchange and comparative analysis” in which different “modes of perception and thinking” are investigated.² Because this changed concept of art now touches upon developments of processes and capacities that are very different to those traditionally taught at art academies, the wish to institutionally anchor work methods based on investigation or research to new curricula is fully justified. However, it is still debatable whether the Bologna reform is suitable for research art.³ Yet it can be assumed that a much-lamented need to economize in education is at the root of the present academic restructuring. If institutional-critique rejected the notion of producing art works due to the commodity aspect of art objects, then these days the commodity aspect of knowledge production is equally open to criticism.

The spectrum of that which can be substantiated under the term artistic research is very broad and not in the least homogeneous. It ranges from the simple integration of philosophical or scientific knowledge, to the establishment of artistic research as a form of institutionalized self-examination and scientification of artistic practice. For this reason, it is advisable to explore the different heterogeneous forms and diverging goals of what has been categorized under the term “artistic research.”

I. The use of research in the visual arts or using theoretical knowledge to develop artistic work is by no means a contemporary phenomenon. Scientific knowledge, such as optics, colour theory, anatomy, natural science, physics, geometry, and physiology are absorbed by artists as a matter of course and are reflected in their artwork. Relevant contemporary theories and discourses re-emerge in artistic production and influence its forms of presentation, as well as its content.

Referencing science was also common in the twentieth century, in, for example, the reference to psychoanalysis in surrealist painting, to phenomenology in minimal art, or to linguistics in conceptual art. In the sense of a recursion to scientific results, the term artistic research simply refers to the theoretical references finding their way more or less explicitly into works of art. The artworks do not need to be a kind of research themselves, nor do they have to adhere to certain scientific standards. The concept describes *art with research* - not in the sense of art understood as research, but rather by recourse to scientific research.

II. This first form of artistic research, understood as a conscious reception of contemporary theory, has to be distinguished from *art about research*. It includes works that focus thematically on research and its genuine procedures and conclusions, such as when scientific instruments and research situations are depicted in classical painting or when scientific experiments or medical interventions are the subject of art.⁴ Research, in this sense, is the object of an art practice that does not restrict itself to functioning as an object of science. This implies a certain symmetry between art and science: just as there is the science of art, there is also the art of science. The latter subscribes to a genuine artistic explication of a scientific appropriation of the world and its systems of representation. This phenomenon also exists in contemporary art, insofar as it makes science its object and practices an art about science by reflecting on the systems of classification and experimenting that is characteristic of scientific research.⁵ Here, science is translated into art and artistic knowledge is generated about sciences — without admitted scientific methods being claimed for art, to the extent that scientific claims to truth and objectivity are qualified by artistic reflection. Seen from the viewpoint of art, one might recognize the contingency and fictional quality of knowledge, or the aspects of oppression and exclusion inherent in knowledge structures.

III. Another form of artistic research is art that understands itself *as* research, in that scientific processes or conclusions become the instrument of art and are used in the artworks. This refers to a particular phenomenon in contemporary art, in particular in institutional-critique, whereby research is considered a part of the artistic process and is carried out by the artist herself. In this case, art is in fact a form of knowledge. It becomes the site of knowledge production and does not restrict itself to integrating previously known concepts. This can be considered a radicalization of the first constellation of art and science mentioned above, whereby theory is now interpreted as a constitutive element of the artistic practice itself, and scientific methods of research and knowledge generation enter into the artistic process. This is where art and science begin to blur, insofar as scientific argumentation and artistic criterion are seamlessly intertwined, and artistic work does not claim to produce a “work” in the classic sense of the term, but rather (often critical) knowledge, so as to use artistic means to analyze the present day and its social conditions and their structures. The required research is neither a preliminary work phase of art production nor is it a means to an end, rather it is the aim of the work itself. This is not about researching in order to produce an artwork; the work *is* the research. And the result of this research can assume such diverse forms as symposia, services, publications or interventions. Here, artistic research and its product are one and the same.⁶ These might not claim to be scientific methods, but rather to be an enlightening and critical production of knowledge.

IV. It is important to draw a distinction, firstly, between the above forms of artistic research and, secondly, *art as science* in the sense of an academic scientific discipline. These artistic research study programs are focused specifically on putting art on a scientific basis. The art educational program is intended to convey knowledge about society and culture, the field of art, as well as art history and art theory. The declared aim is to establish a theoretical, informed artistic practice that considers the claim of scientific methods through methodic rigor and the transfer of basic knowledge. Art’s capacity for self-reflection and auto-theorizing is referred to as the core aim of turning it into science, which will above all be reflected in PhD programs.⁷ It assumes that art is based in theoretical knowledge, that art can be learned, and that it can be further developed through scientific practice.⁸

It’s possible to articulate criticism of this constellation of art and research. The supposition seems problematic that canonistic knowledge exists, can be integrated into art practice, and can serve as its basis. This is problematic because it neglects the fact that theory itself touches upon research practice and is not available in the form of an export product or of a stable theoretical construction. Knowledge is compacted into information that can be acquired. There is the suspicion that “theory input” is a product of the pressure to economize, because scientific justification could increase the usability and market efficiency of cultural products created by art school graduates.

This particular objective of putting artistic research on a scientific basis is also founded on the problematic assumption that art can only be considered a form of knowledge if it conforms to scientific standards. Knowledge and research are hastily equated with scientific methods and thereby abridged. This tendency is obviously based in an idealization of the sciences and of academic structures. Andrea Fraser, whose work involves art as research in the sense of institutional critique, referred to this danger when she argued that “the critique of art institutions and the art market seemed to precipitate an idealization of academia”.⁹ In view of the unquestioned idealization of the sciences, “a critique of academic institutions and intellectual markets” would be urgently necessary.¹⁰

V. According to Fraser's objection, the increase of artistic research with recourse to theory or even the claim of scientification must lead to a deeper reflection and examination of scientific knowledge production and its institutions. It would need to always practice an *art about science* with critical intentions, rather than practicing a mere scientification of art that has subjected itself to the forces and power structures of academia or the universities. Because why should the assumption that art is a form of knowledge already include turning it into science? On the contrary, has not artistic research as research practice earned its right to be taken seriously enough without subjecting itself to the norms of scientific research?

According to Foucault, art is valid as an independent form of knowledge without obeying the criteria of scientific methods. From the philosophical perspective, the appeal of artistic forms of knowledge consists of their ability, because of diverse forms of presentation, to evoke other knowledge. In reference to painting, Foucault emphasizes the irreducibility of the visible and the speakable and that art has a genuine reference to knowledge. Hence it is not necessary to classify art as sensual and emotional, in order to voice skepticism about the present trend of founding art on science.

VI. According to Foucault, it is the specific artistic form of knowledge that enables us to refer to that which cannot be presented or narrated within a historic structure of knowledge. *Art as a different form of knowledge* permits, therefore, a subversion of science when it refers to the exclusions inherent in scientific knowledge production. According to this, its significance is less about "...showing the invisible, but rather showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible."¹¹ Art can thus reveal the concealed, flipside of knowledge. While the various orders of knowledge necessarily produce exclusions and restrict the scope of the knowable, art seems to be able to refer to that, which cannot be articulated within the respective fields of knowledge. Art is given the additional role of referring to the non-representational, and of helping to participate in the fissures and new formation of knowledge structures. This different knowledge, one that questions the tight limitations of modern rationality by articulating — in contrast to objective, absolute, consistent scientific knowledge — knowledge that is equally ambivalent, incommensurable, and singular. Or, formulated in another manner, science and theory are also part of a power system, and not an apparently neutral point of reference for science-based culture production.

In "The Discourse on Language," Foucault expresses the clear-sighted fear that the scientifically institutionalized "will to knowledge...tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse"¹³. He refers to this will to knowledge that makes the arts seek to base themselves in science — "in short, upon true discourse"¹⁴ as a powerful system of exclusion.

VII. Conversely, this implies that a turn can be made against knowledge within art production in order to manifest the hidden conditions of knowledge and the unconscious transferences with regard to claims of scientification. Foucault writes that the intellectual must "struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of 'knowledge,' 'truth,' 'consciousness,' and 'discourse'".¹⁵ In other words, in view of a steadily growing knowledge imperative, it is necessary to recall the theoreticians who refuse to restrict themselves to functioning as suppliers of knowledge, who view knowledge itself with great skepticism, and who see even their own theories as an inherent practice of knowledge criticism. On the basis of such skepticism about basing art on science that idealizes academic standards, an *art or a poetics of knowledge* can emerge that questions the actual construct of the sciences. This applies to the inventive and fictional parts of science as well as the aesthetic dimensions of scientific visual presentations. It is rooted in the view that the creation of

objects of knowledge is not to be separated from their representation, that visualizations, or the construction of models possess knowledge-generating significance. Owing to the so-called ‘crisis of representation,’ a performative effectiveness is ascribed to the representation of knowledge itself, even in the philosophy of science. The systems of representation are considered the framework and conditions for the genesis of knowledge and the representations are seen as constitutive for the respective products. The relevant visualization processes do not only imply the exclusion or restriction of the knowable; they also generate it. This also means that science is not the only place where knowledge is produced, but rather that knowledge is articulated in the historical forms of representation in the sense of relevant “problematization methods”, that it is also expressed in a particular era’s conventions of presentation for literary texts and visual artworks.¹⁶ Conversely, the aesthetic decisions and artistic conventions of presentation that are predetermined by the arts flow into scientific knowledge. Nietzsche had already referred to the poetic-rhetorical character of all knowledge and hence enlisted the sciences in the arts.¹⁷

VIII. In view of artistic research and knowledge criticism, the sciences also show their limitations and restrictions, because the open and discursive quality of the artistic articulation of knowledge cannot be surpassed. For this reason, it must be emphasized that knowledge generated through art cannot as easily be brought to a precise point, as might be implied by the phrase “art as science”. It is much more about formulating doubt from the perspective of art about certain forms of knowledge production. The oft-proclaimed usability and capitalization of knowledge in today’s so-called information society goes hand in hand with an abbreviated view of theoretical practice and philosophical research. If theory were to be reduced to the function of a supplier of knowledge, then any recourse to contemporary philosophy, according to Oliver Marchart, would run the risk of becoming mere “theoretical ornaments attached to art projects”.¹⁸ Heidegger once stated, “Science does not think”. And, with that, formulated a strict distinction between, on the one hand, sciences that were subject to objectification and the logic of representation, and thought that forms a specific reference to reality, on the other.¹⁹ A comparison has to be drawn to a concept of thought or theoretical practice, which is not about accessible knowledge, but, for instance in the sense of Derrida’s deconstruction, allows the incommensurable and the singular to remain open in theory construction.²⁰ It becomes interesting when artistic forms of knowledge do not restrict themselves to applications of theory, but rather begin to develop into hybrid formations of knowledge, or when they intervene in theoretical discourses, or have an impact on them, and thus contribute to theory construction. This summarizes a *hybridization of art and research* that could present itself as the most significant challenge for cultural sciences today. In other words, with a project of artistic research, which decidedly places itself within close proximity of scientific territory, the fraying of the art genres that Adorno noted in the 1960s would fall just as short as the interdisciplinary aspect of the sciences, and, namely, benefit a chiasmic overlapping of art and cultural sciences.

IX. Art’s proclaimed conversion to the sciences did not culminate in the scientification of art, but rather in the development of an intermediary zone where both the arts and the sciences should each be able to mutually interconnect. Foucault’s above-mentioned compulsion to put it on a scientific basis, which the “true discourse” applies to art, is to restrict and respond by marking a threshold between art and science as a point of orientation for hybrid research. According to the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, the “poorly-delineated boundaries” between the sciences — one could also add between art and science — would not only display the most urgent problems, but would also be the place for the still “unknown”.²¹ This

intermediary zone is characterized by the fact that the actual object of research is still undetermined, therefore “the knowledge of certain facts not being yet reduced into concepts”,²² by the fact that the methods are merely provisional and the knowledge structures and their categories and criteria are still in the making. In this liminal sphere of “wild” knowledge that is still unstructured, non-conceptual, and uncanonized, knowledge can flourish that was once termed “event” in philosophy, and which is characterized by the fact that it does not occur within the space and framework of the expected. Derrida himself spoke out against this orientation toward the unexpected even for academic research in “The University Without Condition,”²³ and emphasized that the above-mentioned performative condition of the production of knowledge, which exceeds the traditional representational model of epistemological presentation and becomes actual generating, fails because it neglects the moment of involuntary that is inherent in the new. The fact that performative, institutionalized knowledge belongs to “the order of the masterable possible”²⁴ and touches upon the notion of a sovereign possession of the object, precisely excludes the advent of the unexpected. That – which research needs to constitute, however - which should be inventive to the extreme, is a fundamental openness to anything that oversteps the framework and conditions of the previously possible, in other words, an openness to experience the unknown, or the impossible.²⁵

It is not a coincidence that Derrida repeatedly refers to the arts in the text; the fact that art is dedicated to phenomena that cannot be ruled by scientific-experimental classification is, of course, an inevitable topos in art theory. Traditionally, art is committed to representing the ephemeral forces and manifestations that emerge spontaneously and involuntarily. This opening for the unknown, yet the imminent and the yet to come, means that cultural sciences are making a step in art’s direction.

¹ Gilles Deleuze in “Intellectuals and Power: A conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze”, in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: selected essays and interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 206.

² Simon Sheikh, “Spaces for Thinking. Perspectives on the Art Academy”, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 62 (2006), p. 191-196: p. 192.

³ See Stephan Dilleuth, ‘Old and New Monsters. The Academy and the Corporate Public’, in Annette Hollwood and Barbara Wille (eds.), *Who is afraid of Master of Arts?* (Berlin: Internationale Gesellschaft der Bildenden Künste, 2007), p. 73-84.

⁴ Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy of Doctor Tulp* (1632) or Joseph Wright of Derby’s *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1767/68).

⁵ For example, Mark Dion who is interested in the exhibition forms of scientific research, or Fiona Tan whose artistic research is based on the scientific categorization of ethnology, Ines von Lamswerde who refers to the issue of gene manipulation in her photographic works, or Paul Etienne Lincoln who simulates the structure of scientific experiments.

⁶ Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, Marion von Osten, or Ursula Biemann are among those artists who represent this position.

⁷ See Mika Hannula, Julia Suoranta, and Tere Vadén (eds.), *Artistic Research – theories, methods and practices* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs Universitet, Art Monitor & KUVA, 2005).

⁸ See Eva and Attila Kosa, “In Praise of Normalization”, in: Ute Meta Bauer (ed.), *Education, Information, Entertainment. Current Approaches on Higher Artistic Education* (Vienna: edition selene, 2001), p. 91-98.

⁹ Andrea Fraser in an interview with Yilmaz Dziewior, in *Andrea Fraser. Works: 1984 to 2003*, edited by Yilmaz Dziewior, Kunstverein in Hamburg (Cologne: Dumont, 2003), p. 93.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “The Thought from Outside”, in *Foucault/Blanchot*, translated by Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books 1997), p. 55.

¹³ Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language", in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 219.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault in "Intellectuals and Power", *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 208.

¹⁶ Joseph Vogl, "Einleitung", in *Poetologien des Wissens um 1800* (Munich: Fink 1999).

¹⁷ See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne" ('On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense') in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, volume 1, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin/ New York: dtv/ de Gruyter 1988), p. 873-890.

¹⁸ Oliver Marchart, "The Cultural Turn to the Academy and Back. Cultural Studies under the Influence of Institutionalization, Interdisciplinary and the Theory/Practice Gap" in Ute Meta Bauer (ed.), *Education, Information, Entertainment*, p. 149-165: p. 163.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'What Calls for Thinking?', in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking* (1964), revised and expanded edition, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 373.

²⁰ See Irit Rogoff's defense of theory construction that allow for obscurity, for facts and fiction to mix, that assess themselves according to scientific criteria, and are not sufficiently supported. Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality", in *Academy*, edited by Angelika Nollert et al., (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver 2006), p. 13-20.

²¹ Marcel Mauss, "Body Techniques", in *Sociology and Psychology: Essays* (London: Routledge 1979), p. 95-123: p. 97.

²² Ibid.

²³ Jacques Derrida, "The University Without Condition", in *Without Alibi*, edited and translated by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 202-237.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 234.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 236.